

The glory of Bethlehem, a city of historical and religious importance for those of the Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths alike is vanishing. Surrounded by Israel's Barrier on two sides and restricted roads and roadblocks on the other, urban Bethlehem¹ has become isolated from the rest of the West Bank and most importantly, from Jerusalem.

Straining Links Between Bethlehem and Jerusalem

The spiritual, cultural and economic lifeline of Bethlehem has traditionally been tied to Jerusalem, located just a few kilometres away, allowing residents of both cities to freely visit their holy sites. Today, this centuries-old link is being undermined. A number of Israeli settlements have been built around Bethlehem. Additionally, movement restrictions for Palestinians have been tightened due to the security situation with the aim of protecting Israeli civilians from suicide attacks and other violence.

Bethlehem's self-sufficiency has also diminished with the loss of tourists and pilgrims due to the conflict and to movement restrictions. Before the intifada the people of Bethlehem had a much lower rate of dependency on Israel for work than most other urban centres in the West Bank as they were able to rely on tourism. Today with the tourism sector decimated, most residents can barely make a living.

From 1967 until 1995, Bethlehem was occupied by Israeli forces. Following the Oslo agreements, the Israeli army withdrew from Bethlehem's urban centre and the Palestinian Authority took control. With the outbreak of the second *intifada*, the Israeli army reoccupied the city and blocked the roads leading in and out of the district. In 2002, Bethlehem was placed under 24 hour curfew for 156 days.²

1 According to the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), urban Bethlehem includes the cities of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour. In addition, there are three refugee camps of Ad Duheisha, Ayda and Al 'Aza located in the city centre and three neighbourhoods – Ad Doha, Al Khadr and Artas – with close connections to the city.

2 Palestinian Red Crescent Society database.

Urban Bethlehem has a population of 60,989 residents.³ Another 14,168 refugees live in three refugee camps in Bethlehem. Before the outbreak of the second *intifada* in September 2000, the population of urban Bethlehem was evenly divided between Christians and Muslims (Table 1).⁴ However, this has changed as many Christians have left for other countries (See Table 5 at page 20). The only recreational 'green' area available to residents of Bethlehem is at risk of becoming inaccessible after the Beit Jala-Walaja section of the Barrier⁵ is built. Israeli policies, including Israeli settlements, restricted roads and the current and planned route of the Barrier do not allow space for Palestinian population growth and urban development.

Table 1: Urban Bethlehem in statistics

Christian population (1997)	22,318
Muslim Population (1997)	22,562
Number of hospitals	9
Number of mosques	11
Number of churches	22
Number of high education institutions	2
% of urban population receiving aid from the World Food Programme	10% (6263 beneficiaries)

Source: PCBS various publications

3 PCBS 2004 mid-year projections. According to the 1997 PCBS Population Census, 83% of Bethlehem District's population is Muslim and 17% is Christian. Christians live almost entirely in the urban centres.

4 Analysis of PCBS Census 1997 data. This excludes the refugee camps.

5 The forest of Cremisan, west of Beit Jala is the only green area for Bethlehemites. According to the Israeli Government's planned route for the Barrier, this area will be on the Jerusalem side of the Barrier.

Barriers, Restricted Roads and Settlements

To a visitor wishing to reach the holy sites in Bethlehem, the concrete Barrier erected at the entrance of the city is the most visible manifestation of its physical separation from Jerusalem. For Palestinian residents of Bethlehem, the Barrier is the latest of a series of restrictions - including dirt mounds, road gates, checkpoints and roadblocks, known collectively as 'closure' - implemented over the past decade that has cut the historical road that connects Jerusalem to Bethlehem and Hebron in the south.

Urban Bethlehem is surrounded by a combination of nine Israeli settlements⁶, a stretch of the Barrier, roads restricted to Israelis and a multitude of checkpoints, earth mounds and roadblocks. Approximately 78 physical obstacles surround Bethlehem today (Table 2), along with the Barrier, which is nearing completion along the northern and western sides of the city. The Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) also maintain an expanded presence in and around Rachel's tomb, located in the northern section of the city.

⁶ The settlement of Efrat, occupies the largest geographical area, spreading over 7 hilltops to the south of Bethlehem.

Table 2: Closure and Settlements in the Bethlehem District

Concrete roadblocks	8
Checkpoints	10
Dirt mounds	55
Road gates	1
Barrier gates (closed)	4
km of Barrier completed	10.4
Km of projected route	63
Number of Settlements in district / population	18, population – 65,973
Proportion of roads with restricted access	26%

Source: OCHA, oPt.

Bethlehem residents wishing to reach Jerusalem require a permit from the Israeli Civil Administration that can be obtained from the Etzion District Coordination Office (DCO) after a security review by the Israeli intelligence services. Even with a permit, access to Jerusalem may be denied at the discretion of the Israeli Border Police at Gilo checkpoint.⁷

⁷ Gilo checkpoint, located on the main road between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, blocks the free movement of traffic between the cities. Only Bethlehem residents with special permits can pass on foot. The checkpoint is open 24 hours for tourists and international humanitarian organizations.



Reduced Access to Holy Sites

In accordance with Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Israel is bound to comply with its obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law to ensure access to Christian, Jewish and Muslim holy places that are under its control.⁸

Since 1993, the measures taken by the IDF and intended to provide security to the Israeli population have restricted Bethlehem's Christian and Muslim worshippers from accessing their holy sites in Jerusalem – either Friday prayer at the Al Aqsa Mosque or Sunday mass at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

These sites are very important to their respective religions. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is revered by Christians as the site where Jesus Christ died, was buried and resurrected. Many Christians from around the world visit this site for pilgrimage, especially during Easter. Al Aqsa Mosque is considered by Muslims as the third most important mosque after the Ka'bah and Al-Masjid Annabawi in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, which makes Jerusalem the second holiest place for Muslims after Mecca. The religious significance of Al Aqsa comes from the belief that it is from this site that the Prophet Muhammad is said to have

⁸ On July 9th 2004 the International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion on the Barrier addressed the right of access to holy sites. The Court opined that "[i]n addition to the general guarantees of freedom of movement under Article 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, account must also be taken of specific guarantees of access to the Christian, Jewish and Islamic Holy Places. Israel is bound to comply with its ... obligations under international humanitarian law and international human rights law. Furthermore, it must ensure freedom of access to the Holy Places that came under its control following the 1967 War..." Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice, Legal Consequences of the Construction of the Wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, 9 July 2004, paragraphs 129 and 149.



THE ROAD FROM JERUSALEM TO BETHLEHEM

- Checkpoint
- Wall Blocking Road
- Barrier (completed)
- Road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem
- 1949 Armistice Line (Green Line)
- Israeli Settlement

Barrier - path extracted from satellite imagery and verified with field surveys as of November 2004



M 9km (5.6 miles) - ACCESS TO HOLY SITES



OLD CITY, JERUSALEM

Ikonos Satellite image, December 2003

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MANGER SQUARE, BETHLEHEM

Aerial Photo, October 2002

Aerial Photo: Courtesy of Bethlehem Municipality

OCHA



Cartography: OCHA - oPt - December 2004.

Base data: PA MoP, July 2000, OCHA update 2004

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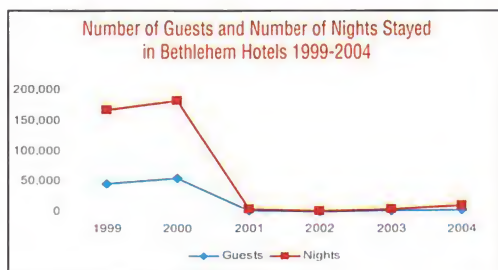
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Steep Decline in Bethlehem's Tourism Sector

The economic impact of closure is not restricted to the area around Rachel's Tomb. Before the *intifada*, Bethlehem residents relied overwhelmingly on the tourism sector. Approximately 18% of the waged workers in urban Bethlehem were employed in hotels, souvenir shops, restaurants, the production of traditional and religious handicrafts and olive wood carvings, travel and tour guide agencies. A construction boom followed the optimism after the 1993 Oslo Peace Agreement in Bethlehem. Preparations were made for the new millennium when two and three million tourists were expected. One million actually arrived, the vast majority before September 2000.¹³

Since the outbreak of the *intifada* and the subsequent restriction on movement of both Palestinians and tourists, Bethlehem's tourism sector has suffered a decline. In 2000, a monthly average of 91,726 tourists entered Bethlehem whereas for the first 10 months

in 2004, only 7,249 entered the city monthly.¹⁴ Similarly, the number of tourist buses entering Bethlehem dropped from more than 2,000 per month in the year 2000, to just 11 per month in 2002. Since then, bus numbers have increased slightly but are still well below pre-*intifada* levels¹⁵ (See Table 4). As the graph above shows, the number of hotel guests has dropped and the duration of their stay



Source: PCBS Hotels Survey (unpublished data)

¹³ Data was provided by the 'Bethlehem 2000' Project Authority, which was set up in preparation for the Millennium celebrations to restore tourist attractions, hotels and infrastructure in expectation of the influx of tourists. Bethlehem's tourist industry did well in the first three-quarters of the year 2000. With the start of the *intifada*, business plummeted.

¹⁴ Source: Palestinian tourist police

¹⁵ Source: Palestine Development and Investment Company (PADICO).

in Bethlehem has also shortened.¹⁶ Since 2000 a total of 28 hotels, 240 olive wood and mother-of-pearl workshops, and 50 restaurants have closed.¹⁷

The number of tourists visiting Bethlehem rose marginally in 2004 following a call by the Vatican directed to its Christian affiliates around the world to visit Bethlehem in an attempt to promote tourism in the city. Tourism is expected to pick up during Christmas following a joint statement made by the Palestinian and the Israeli Ministers of Tourism on 24 November announcing cooperation “in promoting tourism to the Holy Land”.

However, this improvement is not sufficient to significantly alter the dim economic prospects for Bethlehem’s future. Tourist visits are at best sporadic and unpredictable with traders, opening their shops only on the arrival of a tourist bus.



Closed tourist shops

Photo: CCH, 2004

Table 4: Tourism Indicators

	2000	2003	2004 ¹⁸
Number of tourists visiting Bethlehem (monthly average)	91,726	5,266 (Sep-Dec) ¹⁹	7,249
Number of tourist buses entering Bethlehem (monthly average)	2,742 (Jan-Sept)	50	138
Number of hotel workers	393	107	95
% of hotel rooms occupied	22.1	1.2	2.4

Source: Tourist and bus data from the Bethlehem Chambers of Commerce; all other data from the PCBS Hotels Survey (unpublished).

¹⁶ PCBS Hotels Survey.

¹⁷ Data provided by the Bethlehem Chambers of Commerce, November 2004.

¹⁸ The numbers of tourists and buses covers January to October 2004. The other data covers January to September.

¹⁹ The actual number of visitors is likely to be less than the monthly average stated here as data is unavailable between January and August. Data on the number of tourist buses throughout the year indicates that the monthly average number of tourists for 2003 is likely to be half the number stated here.

The Impact on Residents' Livelihoods



Photo: OCHA, 2004

Unlike in other parts of the West Bank, residents of Bethlehem have not had to rely on work in Israel because of the local work opportunities available in tourism.²⁰

The cottage industries run by women producing souvenirs and handicrafts have closed. With few alternative work opportunities, many women fell out of the labour force completely.²¹ Women's labour force participation in Bethlehem district went from being the highest of all West Bank districts to being ranked one of the four lowest in 2003.²²

Authorized tourist vendor

²⁰ Just 8% of all employment in urban centres of Bethlehem was in Israel in 1999 - compared to an average employment in Israel of 20% in all West Bank urban centres. Employment in Israel fell in 2003 to 4% in 2003. Residents of Bethlehem did however rely on East Jerusalem for employment before the *intifada*. Many workers who used to work in East Jerusalem's crafts industry can now no longer reach their jobs and have become unemployed.

²¹ The Mayor of Beit Jala estimated that approximately 200 families in Beit Jala were engaged in olive wood carving and embroidery cottage industries. These petty industries have stopped producing and now people resort to any casual work they can find (Interview, 30/11/04).

²² According to PCBS data, in 1999, 22.7% of women in Bethlehem were in the labour force compared with a West Bank average of 14.6%. In 2003, this fell to 15.5%. According to PCBS labour force data, the number of women employed as unpaid family labourers declined by 9.8% (from 11.7% to 2%) compared to wage labour in the private sector which decline by just 2% (from 47.5% to 45.5%).



Women who used to work in the tourism sector have few options

"There is no-one to help us wage workers in tourism. We have been totally neglected as the situation gets worse" ventured one of four women interviewed by the UN who became unemployed following the outbreak of the *intifada*.

These women feel overlooked by humanitarian organizations, which typically targeted workers previously employed in Israel. In 2002, a newly-founded committee, the Association of Workers in Tourism asked the International Committee of the Red Cross to help 320 households with food coupons worth a \$100 each.

Unemployed for more than four years, these women have given up looking for work. They cannot see how tourism can recover under conditions of such political uncertainty. In the meantime, they want to feel useful. They have enrolled in training courses to improve their language and other tourism-related skills. They still hope that the sector will recover and these skills will be useful. Until this happens, these women, often the sole breadwinners accumulate more debts and worries.

Source: UNSCO

Economic Decline Prompts Christian Emigration

There are few options for residents once they lost their jobs in tourism. Seeing few prospects locally, approximately one-tenth of Bethlehem's Christian population has left Bethlehem for other countries since September 2000.²³ This is likely to have a negative impact on skills and capital investment in Bethlehem's tourism sector and significantly alters the ethnic diversity of the city. Others – who tend to have relatives abroad – have sustained themselves through remittances from relatives abroad.²⁴

Table 5: Christian Emigration from Urban Bethlehem to Other Countries since September 2000

Beit Jala	580 (107 families)
Beit Sahour	621 (100 families)
Bethlehem	870 (150 families)
Total number	2071
% of total Christian population in Bethlehem	9.3%

Source: UNSCO interviews with Mayors of Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Beit Sahour

²³ The Association of Workers in Tourism estimated that of the 1500 wage workers in tourism in the city, 72 had left Bethlehem for the United States, Canada and Europe, the majority having moved with their families.

²⁴ A recent survey conducted by World Food Programme (WFP) suggests that value of remittances in Bethlehem is far higher than in all other West Bank districts. This survey of WFP food aid beneficiaries revealed that 8% of those who receive remittances in the West Bank are from Bethlehem but that they receive as much as 41% of total remittance income. Residents of Bethlehem receive more remittances than in other districts of the West Bank because the majority of migrant relatives live in Europe, the United States and Latin America, where they have a higher standard of living and thus are able to send more money home. In other West Bank districts, the majority of migrant relatives live in Jordan, where incomes are comparatively lower.



Some Bethlehem residents have opted to start new lives in a different country

Hilaneh, a 60 year woman in Bethlehem, misses her two sons who recently migrated with their families to Sweden. She understands that they felt compelled to leave due to the difficulty making a living in Bethlehem. There was no way they could continue paying a rent of \$300 per month, while one son was earning half of his pre-*intifada* salary from selling souvenirs and the other earned a far smaller income now taxiing tourists. Relatives in Sweden helped them settle and both have learned Swedish and found work.

Hilaneh earns USD 300 per month working as a cleaning lady at a school in Beit Jala. Her husband has been unemployed for 25 years due to a stroke. She hoped to follow her children to Sweden but her migration application was rejected.

Source: UNSCO

Conclusion

Once a bustling cultural and spiritual centre hosting tourists and pilgrims from around the world, Bethlehem has become an isolated town, with boarded up shops and abandoned development projects. The age-old link between Jerusalem and Bethlehem is nearly severed as a result of Israeli policies including settlements, a host of physical barriers and roads restricted to Israelis. Without a political settlement that can remove the host of physical obstacles, including the Barrier, and the influence of Israeli settlements, the future for Bethlehem residents looks bleak.

Restricting access to Jerusalem's and Bethlehem's holy sites runs the risk of aggravating religious divisions in an area that has historical and religious importance for those of the Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths alike.

Economically, the occupied Palestinian territory is poor in natural resources. Tourism has the potential to bring in outside sources of income, and if it flourished, the benefits would flow not just to Bethlehem but to the West Bank as a whole.

In the meantime, the city's make-up has changed with the outflow of Christian residents. About 10% of Christian residents are so pessimistic about their predicament that they have chosen to leave Bethlehem altogether and start new lives abroad. This economic emigration will have a long-term impact on the multi-cultural character that has defined the city of Bethlehem for centuries.